Part Five

“Collectivization, Industrialization, and the Great Purge, 1929-1940” (First Part of Chapter 4 of the Text)

The Political Background

The Sixth Comintern Congress: The Sixth Comintern Congress met in Moscow (17 July – 1 September, 1928) in the wake of Soviet foreign political isolation stemming from the rupture of political relations with the capitalist governments of Chiang Kai-shek in China and Stanley Baldwin in Great Britain. This led Moscow to take a sectarian political attitude toward all bourgeois capitalist governments and bourgeois parliamentary political systems that generated their political rule. Hence, the theme of the Sixth Comintern Congress was a renewed emphasis on the Leninist model of proletarian dictatorship as a self-defined proletarian majority under Soviet-style rule, which in turn precluded the western parliamentary principle of the democratic rotation of political majorities in power. In this, the Sixth Comintern Congress launched a vilification campaign against parties defending bourgeois capitalist democracy.

The vilification campaign most targeted non-Soviet Social-Democratic parties of the Second International which continued to defend western-style parliamentary. In a political campaign which called for “class against class,” that is, opposition between Communist parties and Marxist Social-Democratic parties which both claimed to represent the working class, Communist parties were instructed to label Social-Democratic parties as “social-fascists” in being betrayers of Soviet Comintern principles on both the domestic and foreign policy fronts. In standing for bourgeois democracy and their own national foreign interest: Social-Democratic parties were said to support fascist authoritarian imperialist capitalist rule both at home and abroad. The acrimonious rupture between Communist and Social-Democratic parties in Western Europe, begun at the Second Comintern Congress in 1921, took on an intensified radical stance in 1928 with the isolation of the Soviet Union by the Western powers after KMT split in China in 1927 and the Arcos Raid in Great Britain in the same year.

The Threat of Fascism: The threat of fascism was in large measure responsible for a crash program of Soviet industrialization in “five-year plans” beginning in 1928. Fascism extols national ethnic identity, authoritarian single-party rule under a charismatic “leader,” and imperial expansionism. In this, it is diametrically opposed to the Marxist socialist class state at home and Marxist international proletarian class identity abroad. In the case of the Soviet Union, fascist ideology in Nazi Germany particularly stressed territorial expansion in the Soviet Ukraine and fascist ideology in Imperial Japan territorial expansion in the Soviet Far East. As the threat of fascist aggression grew in the 1930s with the coming to power of Adolph Hitler in Germany and Hideki Tojo in Japan, the quest for national security in enhanced industrial military power became an overriding imperative of Stalin’s Soviet Union to protect socialism in one country.

Stalin most poignantly emphasized the need for a crash program of industrialization to meet the military threat of fascism in a famous declaration to Soviet industrial managers on (4 February, 1931) when he declared:

It is sometimes asked whether it is possible to slow down the tempo somewhat, to put a check on the movement [of the pace of industrial development]. No, comrades, it is not possible; the pace must not be slackened! On the contrary, we must accelerate it as much as is within our powers and possibilities. To slacken the pace would mean to lag behind; and those who lag behind are beaten … One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beatings she suffered for falling behind, for her backwardness … All beat her because of her backwardness; because of military backwardness, cultural backwardness, political backwardness, industrial backwardness, [and] agricultural backwardness. They beat her because to do so was profitable and could be done with impunity. We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, they will crush us.
Industrialization Under the Five-Year Plans

**Emphasis on Heavy Industry:** Heavy industry refers to the sector of the economy that manufactures *producers’ goods*, that is, goods that produce goods that continue to produce other goods, most notably, steel, coal, oil, electricity, and machine tools. Such goods are distinguished from *consumers’ goods* of light industry which are consumed as opposed to producing other goods, most notably, food stuffs, clothing, and housing. To be sure, in producing human labor consumers’ goods are necessary to the manufacture of producers’ goods, but in and of themselves consumers’ goods do not produce an augmentation of economic wealth in their very consumption they cease to exist to produce other goods. Emphasis on producers’ goods is a priority in an underdeveloped agricultural economy, because it is only through increased output of producers goods that higher economic development occurs from an ever greater productivity in the augmentation of the physical and technological means of production.

What was seen to distinguish a high rate of industrial growth capacity to socialist planned economy was that the rate of industrial growth could be mandate by the state, since the state owns all the economic wealth and hence the *direction of the investment capital*. In a capitalist economy (a so-called “*demand economy*”) the direction of the investment capital is determined by consumer needs and wants. Hence, the amount and type of investment in heavy industry as producers goods is relegated to the demand for personal consumption. But in a socialist economy (a so-called “*command economy*”) in which the state owns all the means of industrial wealth and investment capital, the state determines the amount and type of investment in heavy industry as producers’ goods.

As such, Soviet theoreticians described the Soviet command economy as the “*new economics*” of economic development theory. To the extent that the state could determine the amount and type of investment in heavy industry, it could leverage to its will the rate of national economic growth by determining the rate and type of investment in heavy industry. And it was this basis of thought that determined Soviet economic development under the *first five-year plans*. The first five-year plan being set for 1928 to 1933; the second for 1932-to 1937, after it was announced that the first five-year plan had been accomplished in just four years; and the third five-year plan being set for the next five years, but which was cut short by the outbreak of World War Two.

The theme of the “new economics” of the Soviet five-year plans was proclaimed by Stanislav Strumilin, who had taken over as head of Gosplan in 1927. *Gosplan* (the State Planning Commission) established in 1921 was the long-range planning organ of the Soviet economy as opposed to *Vesenkha* as the short-range planning organ of the Soviet economy. In addressing were considered to be overwhelming industrial targets of the first five-year plan, Strumilin declared to the membership of the *Soviet Fifteenth Party Congress* (December 2-19, 1927):

> Our task is not to study [capitalist] economics, but to change it. We are bound by no laws. **There are no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm.** The tempo of economic development is subject to decision by human beings.”

The statement that “there are no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm” then became the byword of Soviet economic development throughout all successive five-year plans.

**The Industrial Outcomes of The Five-Year Plans**

**Growth of Industry:** The announced Soviet figures for industrial growth from 1928 to 1940 were prodigious. Among other statistics for the twelve-year period from 1928 to 1940, the production of *steel* was registered to have increased from 4 million to 18.3 million tons; *coal* from 31 million to 165.9 million tons, *oil* from 11.7 to 31.1 million tons, *electricity* from 5.1 to 48.6 million tons, and *tractors* from 1.3 thousand units to 31.6 thousand units. Western economists have questioned the accuracy of these reported Soviet statistics for several reasons, the most notable being that Soviet *factory managers inflated the reports of their output* lest they be seen as slackers; and that much of the output (some estimate as much as 40 percent) was of *questionable or completely unusable quality* because of the emphasis on quantitative output at any cost (what came to be called “*gigantomania*” or “*giganticism*”). Likewise, since the consumers’ goods industry in housing and domestic products were sacrificed to heavy industrial output, the actual gross domestic product as a measure of overall economic growth was much lower.
Perhaps the most noted western expert on Soviet economics Alec Nove estimates that the overall Soviet economy grew at an annual average of 17 percent, or 204 percent over the twelve-year span from 1928 to 1940. Although much less than the inflated Soviet statistics, Nove still acknowledges that such a rate of Soviet overall economic growth was very remarkable given the standard annual 5 percent economic growth rate of western capitalist economies. And here it should also be noted, that beginning with an ever increasing security threat from Nazi German and Imperial Japan, already a significantly greater share of investment had to be devoted to military non-economic growth areas. For example, between 1933 and 1936 the Red Army was tripled in size from 562,000 to 1,500,000 men.

A major consideration of industrialization in the five-year plans was the establishment of new industrial sites beyond European Russia in the area of the east of the Ural Mountains, extending from the Ural River past the Irtysh River to the Ob River and its tributary the Tom River. The industrial cities on these rivers included Magnitogorsk, Omsk, Novosibirsk, and Novokuznetsk (with the latter two cities located in the Kuznetsk Basin between the Ob and Tom Rivers). The new centers of industrial production were so-located because of their immediate access to metallurgical materials – coal, iron-ore, steel, bauxite, aluminum, nickel and tungsten (the 1,300-mile stretch of territory between Magnitogorsk and Novokuznetsk came to be known as the “Ural-Kuznetsk Combine”) and for their distance security from foreign invasion. Cities such as Magnitogorsk and Novokuznetsk with respective populations today of 427,000 and 602,000 grew up overnight.

The Collectivization of Soviet Agriculture

Acquiring Necessary State Turnover Capital from the Countryside: As already noted, by 1927, under NEP the Soviet Union had reached the Tsarist prewar 1914 level of industrial production, but only under the need for repair capital to restore existing physical industrial enterprises that had been rendered inoperative in wartime decline, especially under “wartime communism” of the Russian Civil War from 1918 to 1921. Expanded industrialization beyond the Tsarist prewar 1914 level – to provide for the military-industrial establishment to thwart the threat of international imperialists aggression – would require far more expensive startup capital to construct wholly new physical industrial enterprises. And, the higher cost of the new startup capital would require a higher ratio of state capital turnover gained from Soviet agricultural production for state export on the foreign market. This, in turn, would require both a much higher degree of Soviet agricultural productivity and a much ratio of agricultural exchange between the Soviet state and the Soviet peasantry. Additionally, it would require the release of a large sector of the agricultural population to provide a larger urban work force to operate the new industrial enterprises.

By the end of 1927, it was determined by the Stalinist Politburo that the above requirement could not be achieved under the continuation of NEP agricultural production. Under NEP the state exacted on 15% of peasant household production as land rent, and that was mostly the full income that the state received from Soviet agricultural production under NEP. Any agricultural surplus the individual households produced was sold on the open market, and that such an agricultural surplus was itself very limited by labor-intensive nature of small peasant household agricultural production. Most of the individual household agricultural production was consumed by a necessary large household family labor force.

Throughout NEP, state agricultural profits heavily depended on the agricultural production of “state farms” (sovkhozes) that were established on 15% of the best arable land for the production of cash crops, especially cotton and sugar beet, destined for export on the foreign market. The state farms were huge agricultural holdings of averaging some 5,000 acres (eight square miles) where the produce was owned by the state and the labor force performed as “workers” (rabochie) who were paid a salary by the state; and, as opposed to peasants, as workers the labor force on the state farms were accorded the same ideological status as urban industrial laborers. But aside from the state farms, as of 1928, some 85% of Soviet agriculture was still performed in a labor intensive, self-consuming fashion by 25 million peasant households comprising 80% of the total Soviet population. Bukharin’s equilibrium theory outlook on the gradual, natural consolidation of Soviet agricultural production into larger collective agricultural enterprises through economic hardship of the poor peasantry (bedniaki) at the hands of small rich peasantry (kulaki) had shown no progressive transformation. And throughout the 1920s, Gosplan, under Evgenii Preobrazhenskii (a consort of Trotsky) argued that future Soviet economic growth beyond the prewar
Tsarist level required new startup capital and that required the collectivization of Soviet agriculture, and the forced collectivization when and where necessary.

The Organization of Collectivized Agriculture: By late 1927, Stanislav Strumilin, who succeeded Preobrazhenskii as the Director of Gosplan, called for the immediate socialist transformation of Russia peasant agriculture in the establishment of “agricultural collectives” (kolkhozes). Peasant household farming would be consolidated into average units of 1,700 acres (about two-and-half square miles). Agricultural production on the large combines would be mechanized by state-provided Machine Tractor Stations which rotated their work among the various collectives. Such mechanization of agriculture would in turn release millions of agricultural laborers for urban industry (some 15 million did indeed migrate to the cities between 1928 and 1938). All agricultural production except that from a small subsistence household plot of a half of an acre was to be sold to the state at state mandated prices. A first price for some 40% of a first produce quota sold to the state was well below a subsistence wage level of the cost of production, the rationale being that it was compensation to the state for the use of the land and the cost of the service of the Machine Tractor Stations. A second price for an additional 40% of a second produce quota sold to the state was only at a subsistence wage level of the cost of production with no marginal income to the kolkhoz laborer, and only a third price for the remaining 20% of the kolkhoz produce was sold to the state at a marginal income to the kolkhoz laborer beyond a subsistence wage level of the cost of production.

The kolkhozes as “collective farms” were distinguished from sovkhozes as “state farms” in that they owned the produce of their labor and sold it to the state. The labor force on the collectives were therefore identified as “laborers” (trudishchiesia), as opposed to “workers” (rabochie) on the state farms and in urban industry. The idea behind the Machine Tractor Stations was not just to mechanize Soviet agriculture but also to act as an instrument of political control over the kolkhoz population through leverage through the timing of their appearance to provide the vital services of planting and harvesting. Likewise, the state price structure for kolkhoz production was not only designed to maximize a state exchange ratio for agricultural production but also to incentivize the kolkhoz labor force to maximize production, for only in the final price structure did the kolkhoz work force receive an income beyond a subsistence level of the cost of production. Finally, income from the sale of its product to the state was divided among the kolkhoz work force according to the number of individual day worked and type of labor tasks perform as part of the collective kolkhoz labor force (trudodeni).

The Campaign to Collectivize Soviet Agriculture: The campaign for the collectivization of Soviet agriculture began in 1928 in conjunction with the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan which also began in 1928. The collectivization of Soviet agriculture to achieve the necessary enormously expanded turnover capital from the sale of state grain on the foreign market and a new former peasant labor population for urban industry required the Russian peasant to give up his traditional private household agricultural production lifestyle. How to achieve this transformation of peasant agricultural production was the key issue in the Soviet collectivization which lasted from 1928 until at least 1937. The state hoped to induce the vast majority of the Russian peasantry, that is, the poor peasant and the middle peasant, to accept collectivized agriculture on its own merits: namely, the promise of a better economic existence than being forced into the status of rural proletariat in having to lease their land and hire out their labor to the rich peasant (the kulak) under the competitive market farming of NEP.

The first focus of the state was therefore to “demonize” the rich peasant (kulak) as being characteristic of the economic exploitation of the overwhelming majority of the rest of the peasantry – the poor peasantry and the middle peasantry. The poor peasantry and the middle peasantry were encouraged to consolidate their land holdings farmed by state machinery to “surround the kulak,” to isolate the kulak from the rest of the peasantry. Then, the rest of the peasantry in newly formed collectives were called to “expropriate the kulak,” by seizing the livestock, implements, and land of the kulak as having been gained from the economic exploitation of the rest of the peasantry and share it with the state. Here, urban squads of “collectivization brigades” were also called upon to seize the agricultural produce of kulak production and also share it with state on the grounds that the kulak was starving the cities by destroying his own produce rather than allowing it to be turned over to free urban consumption rather than being sold for profit on the open market. And, finally, the state called for the “elimination of the kulak as a class,” that is, violence against their existence unless they, too, recanted and joined the collectives.
The reality behind the “dekulakization” campaign, which extended from 1928 to 1937 and had its height from 1930 to 1933, was the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture. In fact, most the Russian peasantry – despite the hate of the poor and middle peasantry of the kulak – were opposed to abandoning their household plots of 14 to 20 acres under NEP with its labor-intensive family farming. To be sure, they were happy to make war against the kulak to seize his grain and livestock, but most had little desire to reorganize in collective farms, despite the promise of machinery provided by the state. In fact, the majority of the peasantry resisted the abolition of NEP, in as much as the poor and middle peasant found their economic plight to be more impoverished in economic exploitation by the state under the three-price system than they had been by the kulak under NEP. The real force carrying out the collectivization of Soviet agriculture was therefore squads of the Soviet Secret Police organized as the OGPU (the Unified State Political Administration) until 1934 and the NKVD (the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) thereafter.

Poor and middle peasants who resisted collectivization were identified as kulaks in having a “kulak consciousness” (podkulakhchniki). It is estimated that one and half million peasants were either directly killed, sent into exile in Siberia, or sentenced to the Gulag in the collectivization campaign. The peasantry of the Ukraine, which were most resistant to collectivization, suffered the greatest hardship of all. A wide-scale famine in 1932 caused mass-starvation in the Ukraine, but instead of relaxing its agricultural quota deliveries to the state to feed its own population, Stalin demanded the same standard level of agricultural quota deliveries to the state: not just to continue to support industrialization through foreign export but also to punish Ukrainians for their stubborn resistance to collectivization. It is estimated that some five to eight million Ukrainians perished in the agricultural famine of 1932. Knowledge of this brutality is generally seen as the cause of Stalin’s wife Nadezhda Alliuleva to commit suicide on November 7, 1932 – the fifteenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

On 20 February, 1930, the government announced that some 55% of the peasant households had been collectivized. But continued peasant resistance forced Stalin to announce on 2 March, 1930, in a famous “Dizzy with Success” article in Pravda, that the peasantry should be allowed to collectivize voluntarily. And over the next several months, peasants were allowed to leave the collectives, shrinking the collectives to some 24% of peasant the households. But this was only a respite to motivate spring planting. Beginning in the summer of 1930, forced collectivization resumed until by 1937 the government announced that 93 percent of the peasants had joined collectives. Still, a sullen peasant resistance to collectivization continued in a disincentive to achieve maximum productive output, and it was not under 1940 that the 1927 pre-collectivization level of Soviet agricultural production was again reached.

The Kolkhoz Statute of 1935: To consolidate collectivized agriculture a certain concession was made to individual peasant household farming in the Kolkhoz statute of 1935. Under the Kolkhoz statute, each peasant household was allowed a minimum plot of about a half an acre private land for the production of vegetables, meat, milk, eggs, butter, and fruit. The produce could be kept for household consumption or sold on special kolkhoz markets in urban areas. The peasants were also allocated a certain amount of time each week to work on their own household plots. Over time, such kolkhoz markets supplied at least one-third of all urban food consumption of the above agricultural products. The average peasant came to earn twice as much from his private household plot than from his payment for collective deliveries to the state. This meant that the average peasant worked harder on his private plot than on the cultivated land of the collective. Tension between private household production and state collective production remained throughout most of the history of the Soviet Union.

The Social Outcomes of the Five-Year Plans

A Housing and Transportation Crisis: The crash program of collectivization to release a necessary additional urban labor force engendered an enormous urban housing crisis. Between 1928 and 1940 the urban industrial population increased from seven million to twenty million workers, with most of the new urban work force being released from agricultural production. Housing immediately emerged as a chronic issue of urban relocation. Families were crowded into a single apartment room, and all too many were forced to sleep in makeshift shelters or simply in the streets. To this very day, the Russian state is struggling to deal with a chronic housing crises. Transportation was
partially solved by the construction of the *Moscow subway* in the late 1930s, which was designed to be an architectural marvel of the world. And the Moscow subway does indeed answer to this in its massive marble walkways, golden chandeliers, and statues commemorating feats of Russian history and art. Much later after the Second World War, the Soviet Union also constructed the *Leningrad subway*. The escalator of Moscow subway runs ten levels deep and that of the now Saint Petersburg subway runs fifteen levels deep.

**A Harsh Worker Economic Existence:** In addition to a housing crisis, the urban worker fared no better, and perhaps even worse, than the peasant kolkhoznik. The fact that the industrialization of the five-year plans depended upon state turnover capital gained from grain exports meant a *limited supply of foodstuffs at state outlets* for the workers at home. Likewise, the crash program of industrialization demanded maximum surplus value – production output value over the cost of production labor – from the industrial work force. Thus, like under war-communism from 1918 to 1921, *over-exhaustingly high quota outputs* were demanded from the industrial work force.

Artificially high quota outputs were advertised to have been reached by “*hero shock-workers*” (*udarniki*) and these were used to measure the performance and income of the standard members of the work force. The most famous example was the announced output of 102 tons of coal in a single workday by Aleksei Stakhanov a coal-miner in the Donbas Basin, which was an impossible fourteen times the output of the existing standard norm but which was used to up the existing standard norm for all coal workers. Workers were also expected to contribute an unpaid extra day of work as a “*hero Saturday-worker*” (*subotnik*) to augment their overall productive output. The *popular quip* to characterize the life of the *urban worker* ran as follows: Question: “How do we know that Adam and Eve were Soviet citizens”? Answer: “It is obvious. They had nothing to wear, only an apple to share, and yet they were told that lived in paradise.”

Failure to meet the new higher standard daily norm or to volunteer as a Saturday worker, or even twice being ten minutes late for work, could lead to the charge of *criminal sabotage* against the industrial goals of the five-year plans and lead to a sentence in the *concentration camps* (*Gulags – Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei* or Main Administration of Camps). The concentration camps which came to include some *eight million* inmates were run exclusively by the NKVD, and were as much organized to obtain the cheapest source of labor possible as it was to incarcerate political dissidents. The slave labor camps were established throughout the whole of Russia (hence the term “Gulag Archipelago”) and were primarily used for the *extractive industries* (mining) and *earth works* (road building). Two of the most famous gulags were *Vorkuta* above the Arctic Circle at the Kara Sea and *Kolyma*, again above the Arctic Circle at the East Siberian Sea. The quest to obtain cheap labor for the concentration camps was captured in a *second popular quip* which ran as follows: Guard to prisoner: “How many years are you in for?” Prisoner: “Fifteen years.” Guard: “What did you do to warrant your sentence”? Prisoner: “Nothing!” Guard: “Now, I know you are a liar and an enemy of the state. Under Soviet law you receive only a ten-year sentence for doing nothing.”

**A Transformation of Social Psychology:** Criminal law and educational theory were radically transformed to advance a *voluntarist consciousness* demanded by the five-year plans. Criminal law in the 1920s under theorist *Evgenii Pashukhanis* stressed rehabilitation rather than punishment for civil crimes such as theft. The idea was that the inclination toward theft was derived from past capitalist economic exploitation. What was therefore required was a re-education in non-exploitative socialist economic theory. Educational theory in the 1920s under theorist *Anatolii Lunacharskii* stressed non-directive, affective learning. The idea was that Marxist materialism was predicated on the principle that creative human thought was driven by a spontaneous encounter with human material need, that is, in field trips rather than cognitive classroom instruction.

Both such outlooks were denounced in the 1930s as being in contradiction with the moral and intellectual discipline required to build the industrial infrastructure of socialism. Theft under socialist society, either against one’s fellow citizen or the state, was a moral crime attributed to one’s own *self-standing will* rather a legacy of past consciousness. Likewise, the building socialism could not wait on a spontaneous interaction with nature rather than an immediate cognitive grasp of the principles of engineering of a *self-standing will* in classroom learning. Curriculums were also changed to stress the “*hard sciences*” of mathematics and physics, and *strict grading system* was reestablished for educational advancement.
Assessment of the Soviet Collectivization-Industrialization Campaign

**The Criterion of Judgment:** Stalin’s crash program of collectivization and industrialization was a classic exercise of philosophical instrumentalism in which individual human beings were treated as means to historical ends. Historical instrumentalism lies at the heart of Hegelian and Marxist historical determinism in which the individuals only act as agents of an immanent end-goal of history. In the case of both Hegel and Marx, it is a concept of secular human freedom brought by the naked force of individuals or social classes respectively. Hegelian and Marxist historicism is contrasted with Kantian humanism in which the individual by the very dignity of human person must always be treated as an end in himself rather than as a means to an end-goal of history.

Clearly, the human suffering of Stalin’s crash collectivization and industrialization campaign is a quintessential example of philosophical instrumentalism in the name of historical determinism: building the physical and intellectual basis of a materialist freedom as the end-goal of history. But here it is to be noted that many, and perhaps even most Soviet citizens – due to Soviet ideological indoctrination – actually endorsed the five-year plans as a world-changing model of historical development. Additionally, the Soviet body politic certainly felt a sense of nationalistic pride in seeing the five-year plans restore “Great Russia” to the status of a world power. And, finally, in judging the historical outcome of the five-year plans is must also be recognized that without Stalin’s collectivization-industrial campaign, the Soviet Union, and with it the rest of the world would not have prevailed against Nazi Germany in World War II.

**The "Great Terror" – The Stalinist Purges of the 1930s**

**The Political Background:** The crash program of collectivization and industrialization necessarily meant a purge of the “Bukharinist-right” from the Politburo. By the end of 1930, Nikolai Bukharin, Aleksei Rykov, and Mikhail Tomskii, had all been expelled from the Politburo as the Bukharinist-right that called for the continuation of NEP and acceptance of the development of “socialism as a snail’s pace.” A new ten-member all-Stalinist Politburo membership elected at the Seventeenth Party Congress (26 January-10 February 1934). The most important of the new members were Sergo Ordzhonikidze (a party apparatchik and old Georgian buddy of Stalin), Lazar Kaganovich and Valerian Kuibyshev (identified with the state apparatus who spearheaded the economic goals of the five-year plans) and most importantly Sergei Kirov who had taken over the leadership of Leningrad Party organization in 1926 and acted as loyal Stalinist lieutenant in cleaning up the Leningrad party organization of a “Trotsky-Zinovievist” counterrevolutionary left. Kirov had become the posterchild of the party membership by the Seventeenth Party Congress as a young, handsome, aggressive Communist leader around which all of the leading party membership could rally around.

The Seventeenth Party Congress composed of some 1,108 delegates was dubbed “The Congress of Victors” insofar as it was to extol the economic achievements of the first five-year plan and endorse the economic goals of the second five-year plan, which had already been launched in 1932. But not all the delegates were in accord with the continued extreme political and goals of agricultural collectivization and industrial gigantomania that by then became identified with Stalinism. Already in 1930, a middle-ranking party official Martimian Riutin circulated a “Platform” which called for a relaxation of Stalin’s collectivization and industrialization campaign, lest it lead to a popular protest against Soviet rule. Riutin’s “Platform,” in addressing a relaxation of Stalin’s collectivization and industrialization campaign also called for the need for greater open discussion within the Communist party to address the issue; and most importantly the removal of Stalin from the head of the Communist Party leadership to allow for such open discussion. Stalin called for the immediate execution of Martimian Riutin as a counterrevolutionary party factionalist. But Kirov intervened to spare Riutin with the sanction that he refrain from further public criticism of official Party policy.

By the Seventeenth Party Congress (26 January-10 February, 1934) the Party had become a massive apparatus numbering 3,400,000 members as compared to 450,000 in 1923 at the conclusion of the first Party purge ordered by Lenin. And the dissent expressed in Riutin’s Platform had a good deal of support among the new party membership. So much so, that at least 300 delegates of the 1,108 delegates at the Seventeenth Party Congress wished to see Stalin removed as General Secretary and replaced by Sergei Kirov. Indeed, when it came to voting
for membership of the 139-member Party Central Committee as the body that elected the 10-member Politburo, Stalin received the fewest votes of any candidate up for election to Central Committee, and would not have been elected at all except that, as previously planned, there were only as many candidates set forth for membership as there were members of the Central Committee. Kirov, in turn, was approached by the dissenter to agree to his replacement of Stalin as General Secretary. This Kirov emphatically turned down and informed Stalin of the overture for his replacement. No doubt, Kirov was acting as a loyal Stalinist lieutenant, but some also argue that he was trying to indirectly tell Stalin that it would be wise to slow down on his collectivization-industrialization campaign and arbitrary Party leadership.

The Kirov Assassination and the First Wave of the Great Purge (1934-1936): On 1 December, 1934, Sergei Kirov was assassinated in his office in Leningrad. The assassin Leonid Nikolaev apparently acted out of personal motives, but the fact that he was able so freely to enter Kirov’s headquarters pointed to a widespread lack of security. It remains a matter of conjecture yet today whether Stalin was involved in Kirov’s assassination, but Stalin immediately used the Kirov assassination as a justification to launch a widespread attack against his political opponents. To this end, Stalin first called for the reorganization of the OGPU into the NKVD under its new Stalinist head Genrich Yagoda. Not only was the Secret Police given carte blanche authority to act against Party members, which included arrest, conviction, and political exile to the labor camps, or in many cases direct execution. And the same carte blanche authority was applied to the non-party civilian population. Under Andrei Vyshinskii as State Prosecutor, civilian crimes, e.g., being late for work or not achieving individual work quotas, were now defined as political crimes under the heading of “objective guilt,” that is, political crimes in sabotaging the achievement of the five-year plans and the industrial-military security of the Soviet state.

The main target of the Kirov purge from 1934 to 1936 was the “remnants of a Trotsky-Zinovievist left” said to still be engaged in engendering “party factionalism” to overthrow Stalinist political rule and with it the security of Communist Soviet socialist state in the USSR. Hence, Kirov was said to be assassinated by the leadership of the Trotsky-Zinovievist center, because Kirov, succeeding Zinoviev as head of the Leningrad Party organization, had been assigned the task of making a “final clean-up” of the Leningrad Party organization of a Trotsky-Zinovievist left. The irony of the Kirov purge from 1934 to 1936 was it was aimed against the very leaders of the ideological policies which Stalin now championed: forced collectivization and industrialization at the domestic level and a sectarian attitude toward capitalist governments abroad. But the charge against the Trotsky-Zinovievist center was that it had promoted party factionalism in its challenge to Stalin’s power, which in itself was objectively counterrevolutionary.

The ideological purist Andrei Zhdanov was made the new head of the Leningrad Party organization and charged with completing the final clean-up of a Trotsky-Zinovievist center. And in fact the quest to “root out” Trotsky-Zinovievist counterrevolutionaries took on a national scope well beyond the Leningrad Party organization in addressing any form of political factionalism that stood as a threat to Stalin’s supreme political power. And, then, from 1936 through 1938, Stalin continued a national purge of any political forces — no matter what their Soviet Communist political sincerely — which he considered to be any time of threat to his supreme personal power. In what is identified as a “second wave” and even more extensive wave of a “Great Purge” under Stalin from 1936 to 1938, an even larger number of victims fell prey to Stalin’s megalomania. The victims not only included a continuing campaign against a “Trotsky-Zinovievist left,” but also his former Politburo allies in a Bukharinist-right, and finally most of the top military officer corps headed by Marshall Mikhail Tukhachevskii of Soviet Civil War fame suspected of a conspiracy to establish military rule.

The Moscow Show Trials of the Great Purge from 1936 to 1938

The Moscow Show Trials: The Moscow show trials took place in 1936, 1937, and 1938 and were public show trials designed to act as case studies to justify a pervasive reign of terror throughout all of Soviet society to engender a complete thought transformation of any opposition to Stalinist political rule. The defendants in the public show trials were former Communist Party political leaders, already expelled from the party, and placed on trials as models of counterrevolutionary activity to Soviet rule under Stalin, either by intentionally challenging Stalin’s power or
being responsible for any short-comings of the five-year plans. The Moscow show trials not only led to the conviction and execution or gulag incarceration of the Communist Party officials involved, but were extended to secret arrests, incarceration, and executions among the whole of the Soviet society as object lessons that demanded total thought transformation of the entire non-Party population. Evidence of guilt in the public show trials of former Communist Party leaders was almost entirely adduced from “confessions” exacted under torture by the NKVD at its headquarters in Liubianka Prison in Moscow.

The three public Moscow show trials directed against “anti-Stalinist counter-revolutionary factions” were: the “Trial of the Sixteen” (24-29 August, 1936); the Trial of the Seventeen (23-30 January, 1937); and the Trial of the Twenty-One (12-13 March, 1938). The Trial of the Sixteen in 1936 featured Grigori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev as co-conspirators in a Trotskyist-left; the Trial of the Seventeen in 1937 featured Karl Radek as the chief figure in a parallel Trotskyist-left; and the trial of the Twenty-One in 1938 featured Nikolai Bukharin, Aleksei Rykov, and Mikhail Tomsky as the chief figures of a Bukharinist-right. The first Moscow show trial was conducted under the auspices of Genrikh Yagoda, then head of the NKVD, and the second and third Moscow show trials were conducted under the auspices of Nikolai Ezhov, his successor as head of the NKVD. All three public show trials were conducted under trumped up evidence at times bordering on the preposterous.

Yagoda botched the first show trial by adducing patently fake evidence of a Trotsky conspiring with Zinoviev and Kamenev to overthrow Stalin. Yagoda argued that in 1932 Zinoviev and Kamenev had secretly met with Trotsky’s son, Sedov, in the Bristol Hotel in Copenhagen, Denmark to plot the overthrow of Stalin. But on August 26, 1936, midway through the trial, the Danish newspaper Social-Demokraten pointed out that the Bristol Hotel, where he alleged meeting was declared to have taken place, had been torn down long before the alleged date of the meeting; and that, in any case, Trotsky’s son, Sedov, could not possibly have been in Denmark at the time because on that particular day he was taking an examination in Berlin at the Berlin Technical College. No doubt, this mess-up contributed to led to purge of Yagoda, a psychopath and specialist in drugs who eventually was accused of poisoning the prominent Soviet industrialist Valerian Kuibyshev in January 1935 and the equally prominent Communist writer Maxim Gorky in June 1936.

The second show trial as a “parallel Trotsky-left” earmarked Karl Radek as one of Trotsky’s most vocal supporter as the editor of Pravda in the 1920s. Radek was identified as heading a conspiracy of certain industrialists, most notably Yuri Piatakov and Grigorii Sokolnikov, to sabotage the industrial goals of the five-year plans to bring down Stalinist rule. Radek was spared execution (but died along with Piatakov in the gulag two year later) when he agreed falsely implicate the military leadership in a plot to overthrow Stalinist rule (see below). Sergo Ordzhonikidze, a long-time Georgian Stalinist crony, committed suicide on February 18, 1937, rather than accepting to testify against his co-industrialist, Yuri Piatakov.

The third show trial of an “anti-Soviet Trotskyite-Bukharinist Right” that linked Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky with Trotsky in a conspiracy to overthrow Stalin required a most convoluted stretch of logic. Before supporting NEP in 1921, Bukharin had called for an immediate worldwide anti-colonialist revolution to incite global Communist revolution in Western Europe; and in this Bukharin had indeed in 1918 opposed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Chief Procurator at the show trials, Andrei Vyshinskii, even made the preposterous argument that Bukharin in his disagreement with Lenin had attempted to assassinate Lenin in 1918. The general argument therefore was that Bukharin was not only opposed to socialism in one country in 1918, but, in arguing in favor of the continuation of NEP against the five-year plans of collectivization and accelerated industrialization in 1928, Bukharin, along with his supporters Rykov and Tomsky, were denouncing the military-industrial requirement of Soviet national security, and hence, again, objectively denouncing socialism in one country.

Seventeen of the twenty-one, including Bukharin, received the immediate death sentence. Under torture, Bukharin falsely confessed to the charge of having conspired to overthrow the rule of Stalin, hoping that Stalin would spare the rest of his family, which Stalin did not do. But Bukharin refused to confess to the preposterous charge that he had attempted to assassinate Lenin. And here it should be noted that while Bukharin had already been removed as Executive Director of the Comintern in 1928, he had still held enough favor with Stalin to be the principle author of the Third Soviet Constitution, adopted in 1936. Thus, why Stalin so brutally turned against Bukharin in 1938 still remains something of a puzzle.
The estimates of Party members purged from 1934 to the end of 1938 vary greatly from some **two-hundred thousand to one million**. Certainly, the top Party leadership at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934 was decimated: **98 of the 139 members of the Central Committee** and **1,108 of the 1,966 delegates** of the Seventeenth Party Congress were arrested. The **new Politburo** of the Eighteenth Party Congress (10-21 March, 1939) included only **six of the ten members** at the Seventeenth Party Congress five years before, plus two new members: Nikita Khrushchev and Andrei Zhdanov. The combined number of all party members and non-party members sent to the gulag has been estimated to include at least **3.5 million** and possibly up to **10 million** of the Soviet population. Nikolai Ezhov was the head of the Secret Police during the height of the second wave of the Great Purge from 1936 to 1938, and his tenure as head of the NKVD is still known today as **Ezhovshchina** ("The Dark Times of Ezhov"). Ezhov, a psychopath as much as Yagoda, himself disappeared from the scene in late 1938 as a victim of the Great Purge. Likely, Stalin believed Ezhov to had become too powerful in his own right as the head of his own Secret Police internal army.

A final footnote to the Great Purge was the **assassination of Trotsky himself** on 20 August, 1940, in Mexico City by his own secretary, a Spanish Communist, **Ramon Mercader**. Whether directly ordered by Stalin is still unproven, but Mercader was decorated **in absentia** by Stalin. Only at the Eighteenth Party Congress which met from 10-21 March, 1939, did Stalin officially proclaim an end to the Great Purge; and in so doing, blamed certain **“political excesses”** of his own making on "overly zealous party officials.”

**The Secret Military Trials:** Radek’s implication of the military in his own trial led to a secret army purge that also decimated the higher Soviet military leadership. As secret trials little official evidence was publicized for the military purge, but it was unofficially announced that the Soviet military was prompted by, and in collusion, with foreign military elements, especially German military officers, to seize political power to establish a **military dictatorship**. On 11 June, 1937, three of the top Soviet military officers (three of five Soviet Marshals) were arrested by the NKVD and summarily executed. They included two of the top Civil War military heroes, **Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii** and **Marshall Vasilii Bliukher**.

A spate of secret arrests involving executions or exile to the labor camps followed in the summer and fall of 1937. Beyond the three Soviet marshals, some **35,000 Soviet military officers** were purged (about 50% of the entire officer corps). At the top, the military purge included **14 of 16 Army Commanders, 60 of 67 Corps Commanders, 136 of 199 Division Commanders**, and **221 of 397 Brigade Commanders**. The purge also included most all of the top military officers of the Soviet Navy and Air Force. To make sure that purge would secure his own Communist Party authority over the military, Stalin called for the re-establishment of **Communist political commissars** at every major branch of the Red Army – an institution that had lapsed after the Civil War in the interest of a professional military command.

The draconian military purges have never been explained by any objective evidence of Soviet military complicity with foreign powers to overthrow the rule of Stalin. However, post-World War II Nazi trials did reveal at least one attempt by the **Gestapo** to circulate false evidence of such collusion; and this might induced Stalin’s paranoia to act against his own military in such a devastating fashion, given Soviet-German military collaboration in the 1920s under the Rapallo Agreement. Eventually, some of the purged military officers were released from the concentration camps to become Soviet military leaders during the Second World War, most notably, Marshall **Konstantin Rokossovskii**. In 1958, **Mikhail Tukhachevskii** was rehabilitated as being a victim of the “crimes of Stalin.” The scope of the military purge undoubtedly undermined subsequent Soviet foreign policy. On the one hand, it contributed to a rather poor Soviet military performance in the first stage of the **Russo-Finish War** of 1939-1940. And cognizance of this reality undoubtedly reinforced **Hitler’s decision** to launch a full-scale military offensive against the Soviet Union in 1941.
Explanations for the Great Purge

The Need to Consolidate Single-Person Political Rule: The first and most cited explanation for degree and brutality of the Great Purge was Stalin’s belief that the security of the Soviet state depended not just upon single-party rule but also single-person rule of the Soviet state. In a very real sense, this was a fair extrapolation of Lenin’s own notion of “democratic centralism” and the role Lenin assumed in establishing his own leadership of the Bolshevik party. When not in a majority in the Marxist political movement in Russia, Lenin always schemed and mobilized to form his own “Bolshevik majority” as the only true class political majority of revolutionary Marxism. And it was Lenin who demanded a ban on any form of factionalism at the Soviet Tenth Party Congress (8-16 March, 1921). For Stalin, this meant that if forced collectivization and industrialization was necessary for the survival of the Soviet, he alone must control supreme power to determine the pace and cost through to the end.

In this, his reaction to the “Platform” of Martimian Riutin in 1930 and the opposition to his political rule at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934 was not just a question of his own megalomania and paranoia, but also the conviction that his own supreme political rule was the only successful political path to the national security of the Soviet state.

Closely related to the above, it is argued Stalin foresaw a final military showdown with the capitalist West, especially Nazi Germany after Hitler’s coming to power in 1933 and sworn testament to destroy Bolshevism and acquire German Lebensraum in the Soviet territory. And as noted above, Stalin believed that he alone could stand against political and military forces in Soviet society that called for an end to Soviet Communist rule to placate a foreign enemy, given an unfavorable Soviet showing after the outbreak of war. And here it must be said that Stalin proved to be a formidable leader in facing down the German military onslaught in World War II.

Additional Considerations: As pointed out above, slave labor was the cheapest form of labor for the extractive and earth-work enterprises of the five-year plans. The Secret Police, by the same token, which controlled the slave labor camps that accounted for some 20 percent of the Soviet economy by 1941, had every reason to supply as much slave labor as possible. And beyond the economic consideration, the Secret Police were constrained to round up as many “suspected counterrevolutionaries” as possible, lest it be accused of a lack of revolutionary vigilance and its own membership be candidates for the gulag. And here it should be noted that the more suspected counterrevolutionaries the Secret Police rounded up, the greater became Stalin’s paranoiac suspicion of further networks of counterrevolutionaries. Taken together, these factors constituted a “snowball effect.”

Finally, the magnitude of the Great Purge which encompassed millions of non-Party members served to atomize the entire membership of Soviet society and establish a universal thought control on all members of Soviet society, which the political leadership demanded as party consciousness (party consciousness). No member of Soviet society risked thinking independently of Stalinist political rule, lest in communicating with his neighbor he would be subject to arrest and sentencing, because no one could be sure that his neighbor – either as a willing Communist party agent or under forceful torture – would implicate his neighbor.

Party consciousness required that all works in the arts and sciences depict the single monolithic truth of dialectical materialism depicting all natural and historical development. In 1932, an “All-Soviet Writers’ Union” was established to pre-audit the content of all published materials, and a similar organization was established for the performing arts. The media and the arts were on to express socialist realism as the single correct expression of dialectical materialism as defined by the Soviet Communist Party. Personal creativity was denounced as bourgeois individualism. This intellectual straight-jacket resulted is the suppression of such classical novels as Boris Pasternak’s Dr. Zhivago. Partinost’ ultimately resulted in a dysfunctional lack of true feedback from society, and will only result in a dramatic change decades later under Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika, Glasnost’, and Demokratizatsia.

The Third Soviet “Stalinist” Constitution of 1936

Political Background: While the brutality of the five-year plans and the Great Purge in 1930s were occurring, Stalin, confronted with the rising threat of Nazism and Fascism from Europe and Far Eastern expansion by militarist Imperial Japan, wished to promote a rapprochement with the anti-fascist and anti-militarist democracies of the
West. And it was in this context that Stalin ordered the drafting of a *third Soviet constitution* which was advertised as being the “*most democratic*” in the world to court the favor of democracies in the West. This third Soviet constitution, ironically primarily written by Nikolai Bukharin before he, too, fell victim to the Great Purge, came be called the “*Stalinist Constitution*” of 1936.

**The ‘Democratic Features’ of the Stalinist Constitution of 1936:** As distinguished from the Soviet constitutions of 1918 and 1924, the Stalinist constitution proclaimed the *universal right to equal suffrage*. Hence, the Stalinists now gave the right to vote to all members of Soviet society, including the *former landlord and capitalist classes and religious clergy*, who had been denied the right to vote under the first two constitutions. These groups, which had formerly banned because of an inherent counterrevolutionary consciousness, were now proclaimed to have been “*ideologically rehabilitated*” under two decades of Soviet re-education. And had come to adopt the true class nature Soviet socialist democratic rule. Similarly, the *peasantry*, based on its *raised socialist consciousness* as laborers under collectivized Soviet agriculture, was accorded equal voting power with the urban working class, as opposed to having only one-fifth of the voting power of the urban proletariat under the first two Soviet constitutions. Additionally, members to the Supreme Soviet were also to be *directly elected* instead of indirectly elected through hierarchical tiers of Soviets, as in the previous two constitutions; and the title of government cabinet members was changed from Commissars to *Ministers* to better parallel western-style parliamentary democracies.

But these formal changes were not to challenge the *supreme political rule of the Communist Party and the Nomenklatura screening of all Soviet government officials*, since the true basis of popular democratic rule was axiomatically declared to be the Soviet socialist class rule of the Communist Party. Hence, *Article 126* of the Stalinist constitution declared:

> The most active and politically conscious citizens in the ranks of the working [class] and other sections of the working people unite in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which is the vanguard of the working people in their struggle to strengthen and develop the socialist system and is the foundation of all organizations of the working people, both public and private.

Indeed, the political rule of the Communist Party was also still declared to be a “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” because of the continued capitalist threat to subvert the political survival of the Soviet state by false ideologies from abroad – particularly a right-wing Hitlerian Nazi-Fascist threat and left-wing Trotskyist Internationalist threat. The latter was presumably advanced as a justification for the on-going Great Purge in the “most democratic” of all countries.” But, again, to ingratiate itself to the Western democracies the Stalinist constitution called for the Soviet national anthem to be changed from the *International*, with the theme of a call for a worldwide socialist revolution, to the *Soviet Hymn*, with the theme of a more purely nationalistic flavor.

**The Extension of Federalism:** The Stalinist constitution of 1936 also expanded the four Union Republics of the 1924 constitution into a new subdivision of *eleven republics*. In addition to the Great Russian Republic, the White Russian Republic, and the Ukrainian Republic, the former Transcausian Federative Republic was subdivided into the separate republics of *Georgia, Armenia*, and *Azerbaidzhan*. Likewise, the Central Asian territories, formerly a part of the Great Russian Republic were established as the separate republics of *Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kazakhstan*, and *Kirghizia*.

Later, in 1940, the separate republic of *Moldavia* was established by the merger of western Ukrainian territory with Bessarabia forcibly annexed from Romania; and the separate republics of *Estonia, Latvia*, and *Lithuania*, were formed from the Soviet occupied Baltic states stemming from the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement of August and September, 1939. Thus, the pre-World War II Soviet Union came to include *fifteen republics*. Like the two previous constitutions, regional autonomy was not only established in the fifteen republics, but also in autonomous republics, autonomous regions, and national districts to accommodates some sixty-seven different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups.
Questions for Reflection

(1) What Soviet message did the Sixth Comintern Congress (17 July-1 September 1928) deliver to world Communist parties about their domestic and foreign policy political strategies following failed Soviet foreign policy outcomes in Great Britain and China in 1928? How did these foreign policy outcomes and the future threat of fascist aggression affect Soviet domestic economic policy development as a complete reversal to “socialism at a snail’s pace” once proclaimed by Nikolai Bukharin under NEP? Why was expanded Soviet industrialization beyond its pre-World War I level more expensive to the state as “start-up capital” requiring a greater profit turnover from agricultural exchange by the state?

(2) How was the collectivization of Soviet agriculture designed to both release a large peasant labor force to the cities and provide for a higher profit turnover to the state in its agricultural exchange with the countryside? What occurred under the “de-kukalization” campaign of the NKVD and “collectivization brigades” of urban workers to the kulak farming population or any segments of the middle or poor peasantry that opposed the collectivization of Soviet agriculture. Beyond state payments how was the remaining collective revenue shared by kolkhoz farm labor? How was each peasant household allowed to treat its private half acre land allotment? How did agricultural labor on the state farms (sovkhozes) differ from that on the collectives (kolkhozes)?

(3) What was the targeted area and rationale of investment and the thinking of the “new economics” of the Soviet five-year plans? And how might one assess the results of Soviet economic growth from 1928 to 1940? What new strategic geopolitical areas were targeted for both mineral resources and military security reasons? In what way did the industrialization campaign present a housing and food crisis for the urban working population? What type of worker model did the state try to represent in the hero Stakhanovite shock worker? What type of change in educational theory did the industrial campaign of the five-year plans engender? What did of change in criminal justice theory did the industrial campaign of the five-year plans engender? What historical foreign policy consideration might be cited to justify the human hardship of the Soviet five-year plans?

(4) First begun by Martimian Riutin’s “Platform,” what did the general basis of opposition to Stalin’s leadership wish to see regarding the collectivization-industrialization drive at the Seventeenth Party Congress (26 January-10 February, 1934)? The Kirov purge from 1934 to 1936 targeted whose Communist Party cadre party organization in what city of the Soviet Union. What roles did Genrikh Yagoda and Nikolai Ezhov play in the purge trials? Who were the chief figures in the first Moscow show trial of 1936, the second Moscow show trial of 1937, and the third Moscow show trial of 1938, and of what were they accused? How vast was the secret military purge and how did it affect future political-military events in 1939-1940 and 1941? What was entailed in the “snowball effect” of the purges regarding the NKVD?

(5) How did the purges lead to the consolidation of Stalinist Communist monolithic political rule, and on what basis did Stalin believe that his Communist monolithic political rule was necessary? How did the purges promote the atomization of the whole of Soviet society? How did the purges promote thought control from above under the heading of partinost’?

(6) How did the third Soviet constitution of 1936 change the right to vote? To what did the third Soviet constitution of 1936 change the former terminology of the Council of People’s Commissars? How did the third Soviet constitution of 1936 change the number of constituent Union Republics? On what basis did the third Soviet constitution of 1936 argue that Communist Party rule as the “dictatorship of the proletariat was still necessary?